

Voting Rights in the United States

- 1789** The U.S. Constitution grants states the power to set voting requirements. In most states, only property-owning white men 21 years of age or older were eligible to vote.
- 1828** Maryland becomes the last state to remove religious restrictions for voters.
- 1856** North Carolina is the last state to eliminate property ownership as a requirement to vote, making nearly all white male U.S. citizens 21 years of age or older eligible to vote.
- 1868** The 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution grants full citizenship rights, including voting rights, to all men born or naturalized in the United States. Black voters, however, are systematically turned away from state polling places.
- 1870** The 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is ratified, removing some racial barriers to voting. Native Americans, however, are still denied the right to vote.
- 1877** During the Reconstruction era (1863–1877), freed African American men had the right to vote and hold office, changing the political landscape in the south, but the withdrawal of Union troops and the end of federal oversight results in many southern blacks losing the voting rights they had exercised since Emancipation.
- 1887** The Dawes Act grants citizenship to Native Americans who are willing to disassociate themselves from their tribes, making them eligible to vote.
- 1896** Louisiana passes grandfather clauses to keep former slaves and their descendants from voting, causing a significant drop in the number of registered black voters. Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Virginia do the same.
- 1920** The 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is ratified, giving women nationwide the right to vote. As the 36th state to approve the amendment, Tennessee completes the two-thirds majority needed to make it the law of the land.
- 1924** The Snyder Act grants Native Americans born within the territorial limits of the United States full U.S. citizenship and voting rights.
- 1943** The Magnuson Act gives Chinese immigrants the right to citizenship and the right to vote.
- 1949** The U.S. Supreme Court holds Alabama's literacy test in violation of the 15th Amendment, as it was designed to deny the vote to African Americans.
- 1955** The Federal Voting Assistance Act is passed to assist members of the military with voter registration and voting while stationed overseas.

- 1961** The 23rd Amendment grants people in the District of Columbia the right to vote in presidential elections.
- 1964** The Civil Rights Act of 1964 is passed, prohibiting discrimination in public accommodations, employment, education, governmental services, and voting.
- The 24th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is ratified, eliminating poll taxes in federal elections.
- 1965** The Voting Rights Act of 1965 is signed into law, prohibiting any racially discriminatory act that prevents Americans from voting. After its passage, the number of African Americans registered to vote increases rapidly and exponentially.
- 1966** The U.S. Supreme Court rules that the use of a poll tax violates the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. As a result, poll taxes cannot be used in state or federal elections.
- 1971** The 26th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution lowers the voting age to 18.
- 1974** The U.S. Supreme Court rules that denying convicted felons the right to vote does not violate the equal protection clause of the Constitution. Today, most states have differing policies on felon voting rights. In Tennessee, people convicted of felonies forfeit their eligibility to vote. Depending on the crime and when it was committed, these individuals may be able to have their rights restored.
- 1975** The federal Voting Rights Act is renewed, permanently banning literacy tests nationwide. A section is added, requiring translated voting materials in areas with large numbers of citizens with limited English proficiency.
- 1976** The Overseas Citizens Voting Rights Act, introduced in 1975, takes effect, guaranteeing all citizens living outside the United States the right to register and vote by absentee ballot.
- 1986** The Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act combines the rights found in the Federal Voting Assistance Act of 1955 and the Overseas Citizens Voting Rights Act of 1975, guaranteeing the right to register and vote to members of the armed forces, the merchant marine, and civilian citizens living abroad.
- 1990** The Americans with Disabilities Act expands the responsibilities of state and local election officials to ensure that all disabled Americans are able to register and vote.
- 1993** The National Voter Registration Act, also known as the Motor Voter Act, is enacted, allowing American citizens to register to vote when they are issued a driver's license.
- 2000** A federal court decides that Puerto Ricans living in Puerto Rico, though U.S. citizens, cannot vote for the U.S. president. Residents of U.S. territories cannot vote in presidential elections and do not have voting representation in the U.S. Congress.

2013

In *Shelby County v. Holder*, the Supreme Court strikes down Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act, which established a formula for Congress to use when determining if a state or voting jurisdiction requires prior approval from the U.S. Attorney General or the U.S. District Court for D.C. before changing its voting laws. In response to the ruling, several states—including Texas, North Carolina, Wisconsin, Ohio, Alabama, Mississippi, Virginia, and South Carolina—pass laws that limit voting times or require photo ID at the polls.

2014

Tennessee makes a 2011 law requiring a photo ID to vote more restrictive by defining IDs as only those issued by the state or federal government.

2019

Tennessee governor Bill Lee signs legislation that would result in fines or criminal penalties for voter registration groups who submit a predetermined number of inaccurate or incomplete forms in a year. The law, which had been set to take effect on October 1, 2019, remains temporarily blocked by a federal judge as of April 7, 2020.

This resource was created for the exhibition *We Count: First-Time Voters*, organized by the Frist Art Museum. It is on view at FristArtMuseum.org/WeCount through December 31, 2020.

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